



KANSAS MASTER NATURALIST PROGRAM



Interpretation

Chapter Goals

After completing this chapter, volunteers should be able to:

- Understand the definition of interpretation
- Discuss types of interpretation
- Understand the components of an interpretive experience
- Demonstrate audience management techniques
- Understand the difference between a topic and a theme and the importance/functions each serves

Six Principles of Interpretation

1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural.
4. The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but **provocation**.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of 12) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach.



Bob kept missing the point and was forced to wait around for the next one.

A. What is interpretation?

- An educational activity which aims to reveal **meanings** and **relationships** through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information (Tilden 1957).
- Interpretation is a communication **process** designed to reveal meanings and relationships of our cultural and natural heritage to the public through first-hand experiences with objects, artifacts, landscapes, or sites (Interpretation Canada 1976).
- Interpretation is a **process**, a rendering, by which visitors see, learn, experience and are inspired firsthand... Interpretation is revelation based upon information (Beck and Cable, 1998).

Tilden noted that interpretation transfers ideas and relationships rather and isolated facts and figures. Factual information is used to illustrate points and clarify meanings but it's

the points and meanings he or she is trying to first communicate, not the facts. This communication, coupled with a quality experience, forms memorable interpretation.

B. Interpretation generally takes one of two forms:

1. **Static interpretation** – interpretive contact without a living person to facilitate the contact. Brochures, signs, exhibits, and posters are examples of static interpretations.
2. **Personal service interpretation** – this is interpretation that is facilitated a living person. Examples could include guided tours, slide shows, living history demonstrations and campfire talks.

C. Components of an Interpretive Experience

The information you present is only part of the interpretive process. Here are some factors that will impact your presentation.

- **The Visitor Component**
Know your audience. Visitors will be coming to you for a variety of reasons. One thing is for sure, **most do not want to become experts in the subject you are presenting**, they just want to have fun learning about the site or the topic.
- **The Presentation Component**
The interpreter is not the experience; he or she is only the conduit between the visitor and the resource. Commentary and experiences should always be based on fact and not perception or personal bias. It is acceptable to express an opinion or to include undocumented opinions or thoughts, but be sure to present them as such.
- **The Resource Component**
Many resources can be used to help an audience see and understand the topic. Plants, animals, artifacts, are valuable resources but pictures, smells, and sounds can also help the visitor visualize and internalize the information.



D. Developing the interpretive experiences.

Program planning takes practice, evaluation and reflection. The following steps may help with the planning process.

- **Inventory the resource.**
Know the area or site you will be working in. Inventory the surroundings and take note of what is found there. If you are very familiar with an area, it may be

helpful to take a friend with a fresh set of eyes with you. They may see totally different things that are interesting or appealing to them.

- **Seeing vs. hearing.**

Studies reveal that visitors believe what they see and pay less attention to what they are being told. A visitor will observe the entire site, building, and grounds. If the area is a native prairie and is lined with formal flowerbeds and trees, the visitor will unconsciously believe those flowers or trees were present on the prairie. This may be something those familiar with a site never considered.

- **Develop a theme, and focus all activity on that theme.**

This is one of the most important parts of your program. Choose one specific “big idea” or theme and then decide what you want the visitor to feel, learn or do as a result of your program. A theme will also help you narrow your focus. Most audiences find thematic communication easier to comprehend and more interesting. They will remember the theme along with five or fewer main ideas in the presentation.

- **Select resource contacts and methods to support the theme.**

What can you find to help reinforce your theme? Are there some props, or artifacts, that could allow the visitor’s personal experiences and opinions to become part of the program? This will help the visitor to see how the information relates to them.

“Do not try to satisfy your vanity by teaching a great many things. Awaken people’s curiosity. It is enough to open minds; do not overload them. Put there just a spark. If there is some good inflammable stuff, it will catch fire” (Beck and Cable).

- **Present your program with confidence and enthusiasm.**

The visitor has chosen to attend your program. Show respect for the visitor, yourself and the resource. By planning ahead and allowing your visitor to become part of the experience, you will help make the visitor enjoy the experience and peak their interest to learn more.

E. Audience Management Techniques

Listed are a few techniques for live, personal services interpretive programs. Good technique can also be gained from attending tours and programs at your site or at similar sites.

- **Know the audience and plan your presentation accordingly**

Well-planned programs accommodate audience motivations and needs. Try to arrive ahead of time and visit informally with the group. Be prepared to change a

technique based on your observations. It has been said a good interpreter should have ten times the information needed for the program you have planned.

- **Sit down if needed**
Monitor your group. Shuffling feet, bobbing heads, visiting, are ways of letting the guide know it may be time to have the group sit and refocus. Too much standing and talking at one location will lose the interest of the group.
- **Consider viewing perspectives and sound qualities.**
This is especially important when leading guided walks outdoors. Be aware of the view the visitors are seeing. Change locations or gain different vantage points to help the audience see better. Plan stops so that when you talk for an extended time, sound will not be a problem.
- **Avoid giving too many direction or instructions at a time.**
Instructions and rules are important especially with younger groups. You will want your group to be safe and know what is expected of them, but break up the rules so that they make sense and are easy to remember.
- **Modeling behavior is an important tool.**
Your speech, body language and actions will be reflected in the group. If you pick up trash, you will be exhibit to the group behavior you hope they emulate without even saying anything.
- **Integrate culture and natural history**
Look for ways to add the “people story” into any presentation. Strive to show people they are part of the overall picture.
- **Watch out for passing things around**
In smaller groups passing materials around can work well. However in larger groups, it can be problematic. It may take too long and become a distraction.

Apply the Basic Tools of Interpretation

To begin applying your knowledge of interpretation, here are several guiding principles for effective interpretation. These ideas pertain to both personal and non-personal interpretation techniques.

- **Start with visitor's own knowledge and life experiences.**
Interpreters should relate the subject matter to the lives of visitors to make it real and meaningful.
- **Encourage the use of all five senses.**
Touch, sight, taste, smell, and sound all work together to create lasting impressions.
- **Give examples: show instead of tell.**
Whenever possible, descriptions, demonstrations, or real objects should transport the visitors through a process of unveiling parts of a whole.
- **Use storytelling to convey the whole story, not just its parts.**
Creating a sense of guided discovery can lead visitors through a process of unveiling parts of a whole.
- **Present the most compelling, thought provoking information you have.**
Information must have impact to spark the visitor's interest and curiosity.
- **Engage visitors in a two-way dialogue.**
Dialogue happens when the interpreter prompts conversation with their audience. It happens when we leave people with questions to answer internally.

*I have five senses you must reach
If I'm to earn and you're to teach.
With taste, touch smell and sight so clear,
Why must I receive all sense by ear?
- C. Harold Fabler*

Attention Holding Techniques

Adapted from the National Park Service's Interpretive Development Program.

- Use hand and body gestures – but don't over do it and watch for habits
- Use deliberate pauses to break up the presentation.
- Use props – visual aids, original objects (people remember what they see more than hear).
- Change position every now and then so visitors have to adjust hearing and sight.
- Spice up talk with analogies, metaphors, examples, remember you are telling a story, use frequent questions, but not too many.
- Use positive feedback for reinforcing participation – smile, nod, verbally (not just “okay”, or” right”, and move on – rather “very good”, “you know your stuff”).
- Interesting and important info – Good content makes a big difference in attention even if the delivery is not as good – better than great delivery of useless information.
- Be enthusiastic –it will hold attention. It is related to preparation – you can't be enthusiastic if not prepared.

Questioning Techniques

Four Types of Questions - There are **four** kinds of questions. Each type has a place and purpose.

1. **Memory or “Cognitive” Questions:** involves recall of specific facts or experiences.
2. **Probing or “Convergent” Questions:** ask people to analyze or elaborate on facts or observations to arrive at a correct answer. Such questions can seek clarification or justification for response. They may refocus the response or hint at the correct answer. They typically ask the person to respond using their own words, and they may ask people to interpret what they see.
3. **Divergent Questions:** open-ended, requiring exploration of the unknown. These questions have more than one correct answer. They encourage branching thoughts that expand the imagination. They may ask people to remember information, organize it, analyze it, apply it to new situation, and synthesize it with other knowledge.
4. **Higher Order or “Evaluation” Questions:** cause people to respond by evaluating, drawing inferences, making comparisons, and judgments, and problem-solving, all based on their own set of criteria. Often these questions can be followed up with a “Why” question.

Ten Tips for Using Questions Effectively

1. Make sure your questions are well-thought out and have a purpose. It is not just playing question and answer games. When over-used it can seem like you are giving a quiz and it may distract from the overall interpretive experience.
2. Balance the kinds of questions asked by using all four types as appropriate.
3. Encourage responses by maintaining good eye contact, relaxed body posture, or pause as if expecting them to say more, and encouragement through head nodding, smiling or words like “good”.
4. Use the 5-second rule or even 20-second rule. Wait patiently for an answer.
5. Consider sequence questions. Beginning with easier ones may encourage participation.

6. Beginning questions with the words “What do you think” or “How do you feel” may enhance participation, as the audience will not be afraid of giving a wrong answer.
7. Distribute your questions widely among the audience members so many may speak. If necessary, redirect a question to several people to bring them into the discussion.
8. Encourage audience members to confer with each other as well as with you.
9. Be a good listener. Don't be thinking about the next question as the last one is being answered. All answers, even wrong ones, are important because they give insights into the knowledge and opinions of the audience. They also provide a quick assessment of whether they are confused or understanding the presentation.
10. Do not single out a person who obviously does not want to answer or does not know the correct answer. Doing anything to embarrass people is counterproductive to gaining group participation and engagement.

